

Access to Justice Commission to discuss free civil legal advice website

August 31, 2016

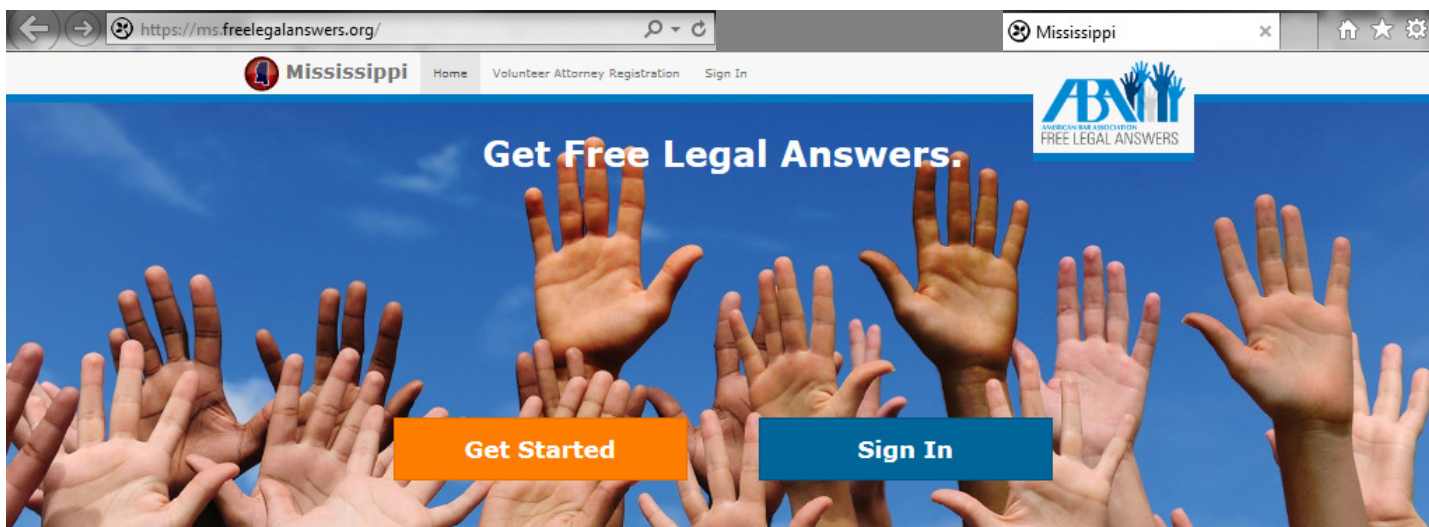
An online free civil legal website recently began operation to assist poor people. Volunteer Mississippi attorneys will answer civil legal questions via e-mail through the website, <https://ms.freelegalanswers.org/>.

The Mississippi Access to Justice Commission, one of the providers of the virtual legal advice clinic, will discuss the service at the quarterly Access to Justice meeting at noon September 6 at the Gartin Justice Building in Jackson. Commission members will gather for lunch at 11:30 a.m.

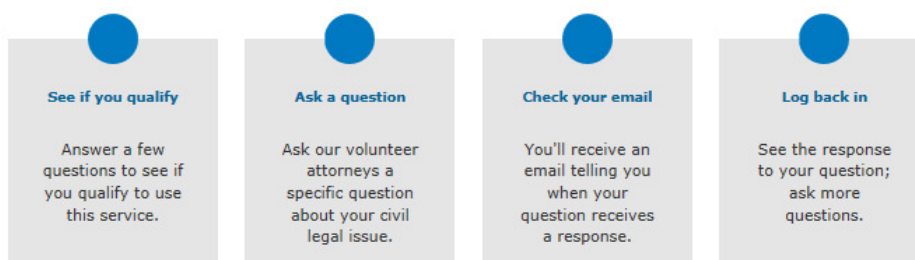
The Access to Justice Commission also will hear a presentation on data gathering and evaluation from LeKesha L. Perry. Perry is the founder of Key Concepts, LLC, a research and evaluation firm. Her presentation is offered in an effort to help legal service providers to evaluate and assess the impact of their work.

The Access to Justice Commission and the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project launched the website ms.freelegalanswers.org on Aug. 22. The program is modeled on one started in Tennessee as [OnlineTNJustice](#) in 2011. The format was so successful that the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service in May approved a proposal to begin implementation of a national interactive pro bono website. Twelve other states have a Free Legal Answers website, and 21 more states are expected to have the service available soon.

The service answers questions regarding civil law. Topics may include family law matters such as divorce, custody, child support, visitation, guardianship, emancipation, adoption, name change and birth certificate correction as well as domestic violence, bankruptcy, consumer issues, education, employment, housing, workers compensation, wills and estate planning, according to Access to Justice Commission Executive Director Tiffany Graves. Free Legal Answers does not deal with criminal law.



How it Works.



People seeking assistance from Free Legal Answers are screened by income. Economic qualifications include having less than \$5,000 in total assets and an annual household income below 200 percent of Federal Poverty Guidelines. The Federal Poverty Guidelines would be an individual annual income of less than \$23,760, or less than \$47,520 for a family of four. Qualified applicants must be at least 18 years old, and must not be incarcerated.

People who qualify for assistance will sign up for an account, then post a question privately to the website. A volunteer attorney Attorneys will not write letters, make phone calls or file documents for the users, and will not represent them in court.

During the Sept. 6 meeting, the Access to Justice Commission also will welcome three new members. Justice Dawn Beam of Sumrall will replace Presiding Justice Jess H. Dickinson, who has served on the commission since it was created 10 years ago. New member Assistant District Attorney Alison Bryant Baker of Gulfport recently helped to coordinate two legal clinics, and was instrumental in establishing a new program to assist homeless individuals with legal issues. New member Faith Garbin of Pascagoula is the manager of the Jackson County Public Law Library. She manages operations of the law library and assists the general public and legal community in finding and using legal resources. For the past two years, Garbin helped the Access to Justice Commission and the Young Lawyers Division of the Mississippi Bar to provide two “Lawyers in the Library” events to provide free legal advice.

The Mississippi Supreme Court appointed Baker and Garbin to replace Commission members Joy Lambert Phillips of Gulfport and Lela Keys of Clarksdale. Phillips, former president of the Mississippi Bar, served as co-chair of the commission 2006-2010. Keys, executive director of Delta Community Partners in Care in Clarksdale, has been a member of the Commission since August 2009.

The Supreme Court appointed Chancellor Jacqueline Mask of Tupelo as Commission co-chair, and reappointed Co-Chair Rodger Wilder of Gulfport. Judge Mask replaces Hinds County Chancellor Denise Owens as co-chair. Judge Owens, who led Access to Justice from the time it was created in 2006, remains a member of the Commission.

The Supreme Court also reappointed Commission members including Court of Appeals Judge Donna Barnes of Tupelo, Chancellor Deborah Gambrell of Hattiesburg, Harrison County Court Judge Margaret Alfonso, Rep. Thomas U. Reynolds of Charleston, Rep. David Baria of Bay St. Louis, attorney and Women’s Foundation of Mississippi Deputy Director Jamie Bardwell of Jackson, attorney Edderick “Beau” Cole of Jackson, attorney and former WLBT News Director Dennis Smith of Jackson, and Michael L. Jones, Associate Director of Medical Clinical Operations for UnitedHealth Group.

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